Module 2: Women’s and Girls’ Rights, International Commitment and Culture

Case Study – Gender Equality and Human Rights in the Philippines

Despite many cultural, economic and political constraints in the Philippines, the Government and numerous civil society groups have worked hard for the realization and promotion of human rights, especially for people living in poverty and for other marginalized groups. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has become the basis for the Government’s enactment of 14 laws promoting women’s human rights, including the establishment of family courts, a women’s desk in all police stations; measures to eliminate human trafficking; and opposing violence against women and children. The Government has also resolved to implement the provisions of the Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals. Although these commitments do not create binding obligations, they have helped guide development programmes for women. They have also provided women’s groups with powerful tools to encourage the Government to promote women’s human rights. These efforts are supported by the UN. The UNFPA Sixth Country Programme includes a wide range of activities that integrate human rights principles and norms. Three examples are presented below:

MOBILIZING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS TO PROMOTE WOMEN’S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

One of the key elements of the human rights framework is the presence of civil society groups that can demand accountability, good governance and transparency from the State. Over the last three decades, numerous national and local people’s movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have participated. The Philippine women’s movement has played a vital role in the process of restoring democracy to the country and redirecting development efforts to achieve greater benefits for poor and marginalized communities and in pushing for legislation to eliminate discriminatory practices and beliefs. The Country Programme supports efforts to build the capacity of NGOs to advocate and develop human rights-based policies and programmes that are sensitive to gender and culture.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES TO CLAIM AND EXERCISE THEIR REPRODUCTIVE AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

‘Demand for Reproductive Health Services’ is a project that uses a number of human rights-based strategies to promote gender equality and reproductive health, particularly for marginalized and excluded groups, including women living in poverty. Preparing and enabling communities to demand their rights means ensuring that people, particularly women, have the skills, attitudes and knowledge to request and access affordable high-quality services. Empowered community organizations, particularly women’s groups, can also help monitor the quality of health facilities and services and advocate their improvement.

The first step in initiating this project was to identify 30 local government units in the 10 poorest provinces and to approach them to undertake the programme. Partnerships with NGOs were established, along with training and education activities. Through the community assessment process, communities recognized reproductive health problems as a leading cause of ill health and death in the Philippines, particularly for women. Thus, addressing reproductive health issues becomes a matter of social justice, ethics and equality. Communities generated a wealth of information, including the perspectives of the poorest community members. As the project had intended, the process of inviting community members to contribute their knowledge and views became a springboard for community organizing.

PROMOTING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS THROUGH GENDER-RESPONSIVE PERFORMANCE OF STATE OBLIGATIONS

The National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, the highest institutional mechanism charged with advancing the status of women and gender equality, coordinates government efforts related to women’s policies, programmes and projects. The Commission works closely with other...
government agencies, NGOs and multilateral development organizations to ensure the protection and promotion of women's human rights. UNFPA supports the efforts of the Commission and other institutions at their request to enhance the capacity of government agencies and their partners to address women's human rights.

CONCLUSIONS

Mobilization of civil society organizations, community leaders and the already strong Filipino women’s movement has contributed to ensuring that women’s human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled to the greatest extent possible. Local and national NGOs, along with local-level community networks, are able to take a human rights-based approach to connecting community residents to vital reproductive health services. Participating in community assessments, for example, has helped residents become more empowered rights-holders. This means that they can take an active role in articulating the community’s needs and assessing the effectiveness of institutional responses.

Finally, those two groups – civil society and community members – probably would have made less progress if national and local governing bodies and their service-providing agencies had not prepared themselves to act within the same human rights framework that guides the other parties. The large-scale adoption of human rights-based performance assessment tools is particularly notable. The tools, by their very nature, call for the participation of all stakeholders – including NGOs, community leaders and service recipients – in the planning, implementation and monitoring of services. A human rights-based approach to reproductive health demands attention to much more than the features of the particular services being offered. Service providers and recipients are bound up in a much larger network of relationships that all help to shape the nature of the ongoing exchange between duty-bearers and rights-holders. Infusing that network in the Philippines with the knowledge and tools to operationalize fundamental human rights principles can help to improve the quality of life of all Filipinos.